

Hello, family of God! This is pastor Renée Antrosio, eager to delve deeper together into our understanding of adoption into God's family. In my previous teaching, I noted that Jesus' life was bracketed by two adoption narratives- the first during Mary's pregnancy when Joseph chose to take on the role of earthly father to the baby that was growing in her womb. Then, over thirty years later, when Jesus was dying, he directed the disciple he loved- usually considered to be John- to take Mary as his own mother and for Mary to accept John as her eldest son, to care for each other.

With these examples in mind, I want to consider our physical need throughout our lives- from babies, to youth, to middle-age, to elderly- to be adopted **and** to adopt others as chosen family in practical, active love. And I also want to consider our spiritual need of adoption into God's family through the Holy Spirit, as Jesus explained to Nicodemus in John 3 and Paul described in Romans 8- that we would be born again, anew, into the family of God, joint heirs and siblings with Jesus.

The primary distinction that stands out to me about both spiritual and physical adoption is **choice**. Joseph chose to accept the angel's words in a dream that the child conceived without him was of the Holy Spirit. Joseph chose to embrace the responsibility of being a father to the child that he hadn't known about, whose timing seemed inconvenient to a proper wedding and marriage. The apostle John and Jesus' mother Mary chose to accept each other as mother and son when Jesus encouraged them to, with all the responsibilities and rewards of an added family relationship.

Our spiritual adoption into God's family is also a choice. God chose to create humanity in the image of God- Adam and Eve as God's first children. And God continues to choose to be in relationship with humans- to provide food and clothing and reveal God's self through creation and then particularly in the person of Jesus to demonstrate God's love for us- even when we reject God and God's goodness- whether by eating from the tree God warned us against or by the many ways we do violence to each other. God chooses us. The question for each of us- in our lives, every day, moment by moment, is whether or not we choose God. Do you- do I- want to participate in God's forever family? And if so, what does that choice, those choices, look like?

But first I want us to savor the freedom of choice, the joy of getting to choose. The relationship between choice and possibility, especially as a follower of Jesus, is a fascinating one. Lately, I've been reminding myself that I have choices each day. I can easily become a person of habits and routines, creating a schedule that provides structure and stability that quickly obscures the amount of freedom of choice and the joy of possibility that are available to me. I could get up early and go walking in the cool of the morning with the birds. Or I could stay in bed, light a candle, read some poetry, write

in my journal. I could try a new recipe, or revive an old one, or not cook at all. I could have people over or spend an evening by myself. These, and many other little choices shape my days. I can choose to be open to the unexpected, to change my plans, to do something new on a whim. Or I can let my habits, what used to work for me, become ruts.

Choosing Jesus, to participate in God's family, brings greater possibility, enlarges our freedom. In Romans 8, Paul describes it this way:

So now there isn't any condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and death. Romans 8:1-2

There is no condemnation, rather there is possibility. We can choose life, as Jesus said,

The thief enters only to steal, kill, and destroy. I came so that they could have life—indeed, so that they could live life to the fullest. John 10:10 (CEB)

Jesus wants us to live our best life, life to the fullest. Do we believe that? Do I, do you? Or have we come to think of Christianity as a set of rules and regulations that constrict our lives and narrow our choices? Have we, as I realized during my sabbatical, ceased to see each day, view our lives, as filled with possibility?

God does not compel us. We have the freedom to choose. And I wonder if with each choice of following Jesus comes more freedom. The choice to ask Jesus into our hearts, to be Lord of our lives. With that choice, we embrace that we are never alone. Jesus said

Look, I myself will be with you every day until the end of this present age." Matthew 28:20b

Echoing God's promise to the chosen people, Israel, through Moses when they were about to enter the promised land

Be strong and courageous... for the Lord your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you." Deuteronomy 31:6 (NIV)

When we respond to God's choosing of us by saying yes to Jesus, we will never be alone or abandoned. We choose God's presence with us. And with that choice comes

the freedom from fear. Fear of death, fear of condemnation, fear of separation. As Paul says in Romans 8

**All who are led by God's Spirit are God's sons and daughters. You didn't receive a spirit of slavery to lead you back again into fear, but you received a Spirit that shows you are adopted as his children. With this Spirit, we cry, "Abba, Father."
Romans 8:14-15**

I would suggest, perhaps contrary to what some of us have heard preached, that it is not one choice, but rather a series of choices we are invited to make to fully embrace our identity as God's daughters and sons. Like many stages of development, spiritual development is not always linear, with each step occurring in a prescribed order. Perhaps we first choose to accept Jesus as Lord, inviting him into our lives, a classic acceptance of John 3:16

God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him won't perish but will have eternal life. John 3:16

We respond to God's love for the world, the love expressed in Jesus, by saying yes to God's saving work in Jesus the Messiah, entrusting ourselves to him as a new way of living our lives. This may be a private choice, a prayer between you and God. You might feel an immediate difference in your life, or the change of feeling Jesus' presence with you might be gradual.

[Pause and listen to the [Pray As You Go Saturday 25 May Examen](#) as a way of thinking about Jesus' presence with us throughout the week.]

The choice to be baptized is another step on this journey. Baptism is a public affirmation of that private decision to follow Jesus. We might compare it to an official adoption ceremony. The heart relationship might already be there, but the community acknowledgement is also an important change in family status. I wonder if we might see baptism as a step into greater freedom, greater possibility. In baptism we embrace and are embraced by the family of God, publicly joining the community of believers.

Maybe this is a step you haven't made yet- the public adoption where you choose Jesus in front of your community, dedicating your life to following him. It is a big decision, a confirmation of a new identity, publicizing what had been a more private relationship. And it can be a significant turning point in people's lives, a marker of a transition from living for ourselves to living for God.

Baptism is an important choice, but it isn't the end of our conversion. Some might say it is just the beginning. Every day we choose whom to follow- the world, ourselves, the idols of our time, or Jesus. Sometimes there are big decisions, and some days are made up of all the small choices we make. Choosing to participate in a church family. Choosing to share our resources by tithing and offerings. Choosing to share our talents, time, and gifts with our community. These are all important aspects of fully participating in God's family. And I again want to consider how we might see each of these choices, and more, as embracing greater freedom and possibility. Freedom from the way our things possess us. Freedom from selfishness and self-centeredness. Meaningfully contributing to and participating in something much bigger than ourselves- the family and kingdom of God.

Now the way we live is based on the Spirit, not based on selfishness. People whose lives are based on selfishness think about selfish things, but people whose lives are based on the Spirit think about things that are related to the Spirit. The attitude that comes from selfishness leads to death, but the attitude that comes from the Spirit leads to life and peace. Romans 8:4b-6 (CEB)

Choosing to be led by the Spirit, asking for more of the Spirit in our lives, praying for the baptism of the Holy Spirit to empower us in new ways brings more freedom, more possibility. Choosing to say yes to God, to follow Jesus, is choosing an adventure. This is the part that I sometimes forget. That when I perceive my life as a series of tasks to be done, responsibilities to fulfill, meetings to attend- I am no longer awake to the possibilities and opportunities of choice in each day. I have ceased to listen, look, and be aware of the Spirit's movement when I am not awake to the mystery, awe, and possibility. Jesus said to Nicodemus:

"I assure you, unless someone is born of water and the Spirit, it's not possible to enter God's kingdom. Whatever is born of the flesh is flesh, and whatever is born of the Spirit is spirit. Don't be surprised that I said to you, 'You must be born anew.' God's Spirit blows wherever it wishes. You hear its sound, but you don't know where it comes from or where it is going. It's the same with everyone who is born of the Spirit." John 3:5-8

Being open to the Spirit is another stage or level of adoption and participation in God's family life. When our identity as children of God- that freedom from fear and death- really sinks in and we are changed. As Paul said in Romans 8

The same Spirit agrees with our spirit, that we are God's children. But if we are children, we are also heirs. We are God's heirs and fellow heirs with Christ, if we

really suffer with him so that we can also be glorified with him. Romans 8:16-17 (CEB)

But, wait, I think. I like the part of being joint heirs with Jesus remembering that old song-

*I'm so glad I'm a part of the family of God...
Joint heirs with Jesus as we travel this sod*

And being glorified with Jesus sounds fine too, better than the old fear of death. But the suffering doesn't sound great. And yet, I realize almost immediately, that we all suffer. The question, or difference, is what kinds of suffering we endure, who is it with, what is it for, and how do we understand it. It isn't a question of whether or not we suffer. All humans suffer; Jesus suffered.

Although he was a Son, he learned obedience from what he suffered. After he had been made complete/perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for everyone who obeys him. Hebrews 5:8-9

Compassion for the pain of the world, for the pain of others, entails suffering. When I read the news, I can easily become overwhelmed by the suffering. I can lose track of the joy, the possibility that I perceived in the morning. So, what can we do, what can I do, as a compassionate response to the suffering around us?

This, I think, is where the physical, earthly part of adoption comes in. Participation in God's family is not just a spiritual thing. I'm reminded of the old saying about someone becoming so spiritual as to be of no earthly good. Our family needs us. Whether it is to provide a meal for someone, or run an errand, or babysit. Or take time to listen. To invite someone for coffee or a walk. To be a kind of mother or brother or child to someone. To love them as family. Each of us has the need to be loved in practical ways by our adopted family and to express practical love for our adopted family as well.

One of the things I realized on my sabbatical is that I need babies and children, or even just one baby and one child, in my life. I don't need to actually adopt a child- I feel no call to do that- but rather to invest more deeply in the relationships I already have with families with young children. To prioritize them as family. And there are parental figures in my life, in this adopted family we call a fellowship, that I also want to embrace more fully in care. For each of us it will look a little different, how we participate in this family of God. And I want to encourage us- as individuals and a fellowship- to embrace each other as family more deeply. That we will not be alone- not just because Jesus is with us every day and that God will never leave us or forsake us- but also to be the hands and

feet and family of God to each other. Perhaps that means investing in the college education of our African-American family by contributing to the NCF Reparations Fund. Perhaps it means reaching out to one person each week with an encouraging word. Perhaps it means sending a card, baking cookies, or making a phone call. We are invited to be open to the Spirit's leading, the possibility and the freedom, to engage more fully in the family of God. To adopt and be adopted. Because the answer to the teaching title of *Adoption-Who Needs It?* is that we all do. From God and by each other.

And so today we are invited, again, each day, to choose. To embrace the freedom and possibility of life in God's family. Perhaps that means asking Jesus to be Lord of your life, to be with you always. Perhaps you want to formalize that adoption with baptism, to choose publicly what is true in your heart. Perhaps you want prayer for more of the Holy Spirit, for that wind to blow through your life, embracing the adventure of life in the Spirit. As a member of the family of God, perhaps you are being called to deepen your relationships with this family through active love. To choose to more fully adopt this family of which we are a part through the practical caregiving like Joseph did for the baby and then child Jesus, or like the beloved apostle and Mary did for each other. To feed, to clothe, to teach, to listen and to let our family provide for us as well. This truly is an Amazing Grace to be embraced as family, not lost but found, beyond anything we could ever imagine. May we be open to the adventure and possibility of this love. Amen.